THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

HOW SILENTLY, HOW SILENTLY

December 6, 1998
John M. Buchanan

If God's incomprehensibility does not grip us in a word, if it does not draw us into his superluminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our close-hugged truths . . . we have misunderstood the words of Christianity.

Karl Rahner

Eternal God, through long generations you prepared a way for the coming of your Son, and by your Spirit you still bring light to illuminate our paths. Renew us in faith and hope that we may welcome Christ to rule our thoughts and claim our love, as Lord of lords and King of kings, to whom be glory always. Amen.

A Prayer for Advent
Book of Common Worship

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 11:1-9
Luke 1:5-25
"When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized he had seen a vision in the sanctuary." Luke 1:22

Dear God, in the middle of the busiest and noisiest time of year, we come to be silent in your presence, and to listen for the word you have for us. So silence in us now any voice but your own. And startle us with the new possibilities created by your love and your grace and your forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

I was never much interested, frankly, in Zechariah and Elizabeth and their peculiar son, John, who when he grows up, goes around disturbing everybody and eventually gets himself jailed and executed. I never thought that Elizabeth and Zechariah were nearly as interesting as Mary and Joseph, and all that business about the Temple and incense and what happened to Zechariah, losing his voice, never compelled me as much as shepherds on the hillside and whole choirs of angels and the little town of Bethlehem and the manger.

For my money, you could just drop the whole first chapter of Luke's gospel and start where the real story begins, with the birth of Jesus. It took me decades to rediscover Zechariah and Elizabeth, and each year now my appreciation for them deepens, and each time I read their story I discover new depth and new meaning.

Part of my interest in them stems from my fascination with the Bible as literature. There are scholars who examine the biblical texts with the same analytical tools as they use to analyze Shakespeare or Plato or Homer. And the theory that intrigues me every year when I read this esoteric stuff is the literary scholar's conclusion that it looks like the original Gospel of Luke began with chapter three. Take a look: chapter one is about Elizabeth and Zechariah; chapter two is about the birth. Chapter three begins with a proper introductory paragraph for a first century book like Luke . . . "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius." It just feels like the beginning of a story—when Jesus of Nazareth is about thirty years old and wanders out into the wilderness one day and is baptized by his cousin. So the scholars in their studies, using their computers to compare words, phrases, writing styles, ask that if the original began with chapter 3, then how did the first two chapters get there—the ones with the stories of the shepherds and angels and Bethlehem and before that, Zechariah and Elizabeth? Where did these stories come from? Who wrote them, and why and how? (See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 239-285).

The scholars have theories that perhaps Luke himself began to ask about Jesus' birth and childhood. Or perhaps someone else wrote down what is called the "oral tradition." I have a theory I've developed over the years. I'm not sure it is academically respectable, but here it is; a four-word literary hypothesis: his mother did it.

Luke wrote several decades after Jesus life, maybe around 70 A.D. Jesus' mother, Mary, was maybe 85. My theory is that she heard about Luke's version of the story, or perhaps read the first draft, summoned the author, and said:

> Wait a minute, young man, you've forgotten something. You're forgetting a lot, actually. This story begins a long time before you arrived on the scene. It begins with some strange and mysterious events that occurred when I was a young girl, just a teen-ager.
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> First, my Aunt Elizabeth. She and her husband Zechariah lived in the hill country. Both of them were from priestly families. Zechariah was a priest. They had no children of their own. In those days, having no children was an embarrassment. But they stayed together over the years, as their affection and respect and love for each other deepened. The priests in Judah took turns serving in the Temple. Once a year, Zechariah would leave Elizabeth, walk all the way to Jerusalem, and with the other priests in his section perform the prescribed duties around the Temple. He lived there for the week, saw to the lighting of the candles, burning incense, the sacrifices. Each morning they cast lots to determine who did what, and one glorious day Zechariah drew the prize everybody wanted—lighting incense in the sanctuary, just outside the holy of holies, at the end of the day. You were only allowed to do it once in your lifetime, and many of his fellow priests never got to do it at all. It was such an honor. Best of all, people gathered outside to watch and wait for the smoke of the incense to rise in the evening air, to add their prayers to the lovely incense, rising up to God, and then to receive the blessing which the priest was allowed to confer on them when he emerged from the sanctuary, a lovely moment. There was no higher occasion in the life of a priest than that.
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> Well, on that day Zechariah entered the sanctuary to light the incense, and he didn't emerge. People got nervous, worried. Nobody stayed in there for long. And when he finally came out, he just stood there, with a bewildered look on his face. He didn't confer the blessing. He couldn't speak. People asked him what was wrong, and he couldn't say a word; never spoke another word until Elizabeth had a baby nine months later. I can still remember my parents and all the neighbors laughing about it. They used to say, "Old Zechariah may not have been able to talk when he came home from Temple duty, but apparently he could do something else!" (See Barbara Brown Taylor's *Bread of Angels*).
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> Later, when he could speak, he said that an angel had appeared that day when he was in the sanctuary and told him about the baby and to name the baby John, and when he was a little skeptical—and who wouldn't be?--the angel struck him dumb.
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> Of course, in the middle of all that, something amazing happened to me, something so similar that I actually left home and went to stay with my Aunt Elizabeth until her baby came, by which time my own pregnancy was well along. But, that's the next story I want to you to remember. For now, don't forget dear Elizabeth and Zechariah and their baby, who, when he grew up, was the first one to recognize my son as God's own son; was the first to know and to say it, that God's redemption was now among us."

Well, maybe—probably not. But there's a lot in this story that is provocative. There's a lot in there that compels the attention of clergy people. What happens to Zechariah is the ultimate clergy nightmare. It's the highest, holiest, most important moment in his life, and he can't talk.

Psychiatrists tell us that every profession has its favorite nightmare, based on the particular vulnerabilities and fears of the particular profession: a lawyer standing before a judge in an important case forgets what she wants to say; a basketball player on the free-throw line with the game tied and no time on the clock and misses the shot. For ministers, it is something like this: the service is starting and you've slept in; or you're not prepared—you've forgotten to write a sermon and it's Sunday morning; or the ultimate—you're in the pulpit and they're all there looking up expectantly and you suddenly realize that you have your workout clothes on; or, worst of all, you look at the pulpit where your sermon manuscript is supposed to be, but it's gone! You have nothing.

Well, there is Zechariah, coming out of the sanctuary, a crowd awaiting his blessing, the greatest moment in his professional life, like being invited to preach in St. Peter's or St. Giles, and he can't speak. And, furthermore, the reason he can't speak is that God has taken away his voice. "Religious professional silenced by God"—now there's a pregnant suggestion, God silencing the preacher; God enforcing a time to stop talking and listen.

I thought about Zechariah's silence when I read Martin Marty's editorial in *The Christian Century* this week about Jerry Falwell on the Larry King show, going on and on, arguing that Jesus really did have a position on homosexuality, even though he never mentions it in the Gospels, because Jesus is God and God is Jesus, and God inspired the whole Bible, and so Jesus actually "inspired all 773,000 words of the English Bible," *etc., etc., ad nauseum.* (*The Christian Century*, 12/2/98).

Barbara Brown Taylor, on this story, wonders, "what would happen if Christians became very still and quiet, creating oases of silence for people whose ears ache and whose heads hurt from all the noise? What would happen if we stopped pretending we could read God's mind and just sat down somewhere to do nothing together, watching out for whatever new thing God is doing next?"

"Maybe," she says, "it is time for us to claim the angels' gift of silence again—to stop talking so much, to stop trying to explain, to shut our own mouths before the terrible mystery of God and see what the quiet has to teach us." (p. 94-95).

Zechariah could not speak. He could not explain. He did not have to explain what happened in the sanctuary, what happened to Elizabeth. What was happening to both of them. One way to read this story is that his speechless state was punishment for his disbelief, his lack of trust. I think his silence was a gift. He didn't have to try to explain. He had a nine-month reprieve—Kathleen Norris calls it his own private pregnancy, to ponder what was happening, to reflect on the staggering reality of God doing something new in his life (*Amazing Grace*, p. 76).

I think Zechariah's problem was not disbelief so much as a lack of imagination. He could not conceive of a future different from the present. He could not imagine that God would do something new for him, for Elizabeth, for the community, for the world. Spiritually,

Zechariah had accommodated to the status quo. He had stopped hoping for much, stopped expecting anything, stopped believing in a God who actively engages the world.

The word for that is barrenness. It is a cruel word. There was a time when it referred to a childless woman. Elizabeth's time was that—her purpose was to have priestly babies. It no longer means that—in fact, I think this is a subtle story about Zechariah's barrenness of imagination, his lack of spirit and hope. And, it is a story of God's bold-but-quiet creation of something brand new in the world.

Men must be cautious about this subject and not presume too much. I know someone who thinks it would be just right if what happened to Zechariah happened to every man who starts pontificating about women's reproductive issues. Not a one of us has preached on this text without learning later of women for whom not having a child feels like a curse or punishment. And I tracked down something Kathleen Norris said about it, powerfully, in her recent best seller *Amazing Grace.* Kathleen is married and does not have children. She describes it as her own reconciliation. Reflecting on Mary as Virgin and Mother, Norris wrote:

> "What Mary does is to show me how I indeed can be both virgin and mother. Virgin to the extent that I remain 'one in myself,' able to come to things with newness of heart; mother to the extent that I forget myself in the nurture and service of others, embracing the ripeness of maturity this requires. This Mary is a gender-bender. She could do the same for any man." (*Amazing Grace,* p. 122).

And I thought about one of the most maternal women I knew, my Aunt Peg, who had no children of her own, but who was so consistently life-giving and accepting and loving that I knew with her I was safe and could count on her non-judgmental love; and Mrs. Evans, elderly, childless Sunday School teacher, who put up with our adolescent foolishness and then followed all of us into college or the service and wrote to us and tracked us like Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," and mothered us.

Barrenness is not childlessness. It is an absence of imagination and joyful hope and life-giving love. And that is exactly what Advent is about. It is the glorious affirmation that God creates newness—in the world and in your life and mine; that something new is coming. That is the gift, the miracle of the newness that God will give to those with imagination enough to receive it. That is new birth that can happen in and for each and every one of us.

Zechariah had a nine-month silence in which to ponder the new thing God was doing. I doubt that you and I will have nine hours of waking silence in the busy, noisy weeks to come. But maybe we could begin our period of gestation, our own God-given silence, in the nine or ten minutes it takes to distribute the bread and wine of communion this morning. And maybe, starting today, we will find ways to be silent, speechless, listening. Maybe we will start the day in quiet prayer—still in bed ... "thank you God for the new love you give me this day." Maybe we will walk outside this evening and look up in the starry sky and silently wonder. Maybe we will just do it this year: find a time each day to be quiet and to listen and to receive the gift.

"How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given.

No ear may hear his coming
But in this world of sin,

where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in."

Amen.